

Sermon on John 20:19-31
2nd Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia! Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We continue to proclaim this good news from God, 2000 some years after God raised Jesus from the dead, because we continue to struggle with the same challenges to faith and hope that Jesus' disciples did on the third day following Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial in a tomb. We keep repeating it, because we need to hear it over and over – because maybe the truth is, deep down, we have so many doubts and fears. Especially today. Maybe not about faith, about Jesus rising from the dead or that God exists. But we have so many fears about what is happening around us now, during this world wide corona virus pandemic, that we don't understand. When we have fears about the present, and doubts about the future, we have to have something to hold onto, and that is our faith that God is present, that there is hope for tomorrow being better, and that God's love for us, and our love for God and neighbor will see us through. A lot is at stake!

So as it seems to be the case so often, Sunday after Sunday, the situation the disciples found themselves in that first Easter Sunday after Jesus was crucified, is so similar to the situation we find ourselves in today in the year 2020! Last Sunday on Easter, we heard the story once again how in the early morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene had gone to Jesus' tomb and discovered it empty, with the stone rolled away. Where had they taken Jesus? Peter and John also went to the tomb, and found it empty. So they returned home, in confusion. Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, until she heard a voice call her name, and then she recognized the Lord Jesus. After rushing back to the disciples, she told them that she had seen the Lord! It was the greatest news of all, but they didn't believe her.

That first Easter evening the disciples were locked inside the house, for fear of the religious authorities coming to arrest them. Hadn't they heard Mary's news? Their fear kept them immobilized inside, too afraid to go out to investigate the story themselves. So we heard in the gospel today how Jesus appeared among them all of a sudden, saying "Peace be with you!" Then they rejoiced when they saw the Lord, for they had seen him die, but now Jesus was alive! They saw this with their own eyes!

But Thomas was not there to see the risen Jesus, so when the disciples told him they had seen the Lord, he said he wouldn't believe it until he saw the marks of the nails in his hands and of the spear in his side for himself. He wanted to have

the same convincing experience of Jesus that they had that Easter evening. So they stayed in the house, and a week later Thomas was with them when Jesus appeared among them again. Thomas touched Jesus' hands and his side, where his wounds had been, and saw that it was indeed Jesus. Thomas said "My Lord and my God!" Jesus exclaimed how they had all believed because they had *seen* Jesus with their eyes. Jesus then gave us all hope when he said, "*Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.*" That's you and me, today!

Now John says that he wrote these words and the stories passed down about Jesus so that by reading them you and I may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and so have life in his name! So how is it that our experience today is similar to those disciples that first Easter? The obvious similarity is how we, in this Easter season today, are under Stay at Home orders all over this city and world, separated from many of our loved ones and friends, because of fear of a corona virus – a new virus that we don't understand or have any cure for – a fear of possible sickness or even death!

So, how about you? *What are YOU afraid of this Easter time, and what gives you doubts and questions of faith today?* You can share them with each other in the chat bar. There are lots of fears being expressed after more than a month of staying at home with physical distancing, on all sides of the political spectrum, by all ages. Whether its making ends meet after being laid off from your job, losing a loved one and not being able to hold a funeral service, to questions of how to pay the rent or medical bills without insurance, or when the children will get to return to school. Everything we used to depend on or take for granted seems uncertain now, to even wondering when churches will ever open again for worship – and if people will even come back, now that we have learned how to use Zoom! Some of our anxieties are more serious than others, because some are more based on inconveniences, but others are real fears for the future, life or death. This appears to be a real defining moment in this nation, and for people throughout the world, whether we can really live together once we no longer need to live apart. Will we listen to each other, and find a new path together as a nation, or will we descend into the abyss of blame and protest, division and political strife?

In the gospel, the disciples lived in real fear of being arrested or even killed for their association with Jesus, who had been hunted down, and crucified. They also had real psychological fears, of what to do now that their whole world had come crashing down, and everything had changed. They also were in a crisis of faith, because they really had thought that Jesus was the promised Messiah of God, and then his death had dashed all those hopes. But when Jesus appeared among them that Easter evening, and several more times before his ascension into heaven, it meant much more than even the miracle of seeing him again, alive, not dead!

When Jesus said “peace be with you” as he entered the room, he didn’t mean your troubles now are over! Peace, like the Hebrew word *shalom*, means healing and wholeness in the midst of life. Peace does not remove us from disaster or death, and return everything to the way it once was. As the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel once said, everyone is calling for “*peace, peace*” when there is no peace, only violence, conflict and despair. But God’s peace means that *God is with us, in the midst of our anxiety and suffering, with us most assuredly in the midst of disaster and death, to bring healing, comfort, and new life.*

So what does God’s peace mean for you these days? Is it only a hoped for promise, or can you see it happening around you some days? Where do you see peace in your life now, while you must Stay at Home, often away from your loved ones, and fill your days in other ways, much different than even 30 days before?! Please share your experiences of peace in the chat bar. Or if you are not feeling peace in your life today, what would peace look like if you saw it? What do you *want* the peace God gives to look like? Like Thomas, what do YOU need to see?

So, dear sisters and brothers, the words “Christ is Risen” is not a sentimental message or a false hope given out like an opiate to the masses, like Karl Marx accused religion of propagating. The good news that “Jesus lives” is not nostalgia, words we say just because they pleased our grandparents! “Christ is alive” are words that give life, they are a promise of hope in a world and life full of despair, anxiety, suffering and death. To say “Christ is Risen” is a challenge, a way of living into a future fraught with potential and hope, new beginnings and ways of structuring this society with justice and equity. Because God’s peace isn’t anything like the fragile, often false peace that we humans attempt by glossing over the truth, making treaties which we cannot or will not keep, or shaking hands without meaning or thought. The peace of God, the peace of Christ, is when *Jesus shows up* in a room full of grieving and terrified disciples, women and men who had followed him with hope in what he offered, and had had all their hopes dashed in his death. The peace of God is when you hear that God is with you, when you experience God’s presence when you don’t even expect God to be there, in the worst of times, in the sound of another human’s voice giving you a word of comfort. At home, or in a shelter, or when you are on a ventilator in the ICU.

For in a New York hospital Intensive Care Unit, overcrowded with patients with covid-19 in the hallways and with the hum of ventilators all that one can hear, the peace of God is sometimes heard in the voice of a nurse, who holds a cellphone to a dying patient’s ear, and says “your family wants to tell you how much they love you.” The peace of God can come when friends come calling on another isolated at home and unable to leave, but they gather outside the window to bring greetings and a gift of food. It can also be the joy of someone who uses Zoom for the first time, and so is able to worship with loved ones from their own church

when they have been homebound for so long, unable to worship, but now they hear the words of their friends and of the gospel. I've heard that joy expressed here. The peace of God is when you can gather with friends even in the isolation of your own homes, hear the words "Christ is risen indeed" and say them together, sing a hymn of praise, and eat the bread and drink the wine – the body and blood of Christ – even when you just see the faces and hear the voices on your computer screen! Because the church is not a building or a place, it is a beloved community of people with shared faith in God, the assembly of you who trust in Jesus, the Son of God who gave his life so that you and I would have life forever! Even as we fear the present and doubt the promise.

Someday this pandemic will be over, we will be with our families again, even though we may lose some or even many of our friends and loved ones. We will worship in the building we know so well, even though we know that this building does not represent Redeemer "the church" – it is the physical space where we gather. But our worship and our ministry will likely be transformed in ways we would never have imagined just a few months ago! We will go back to work and our lives in the world once again, but work and life in community may never be the same! American society may be transformed in ways never before imagined – at least I hope so, because the way we have been going has not been working! This pandemic is just the crisis point showing us this truth!

But in the midst of all the pain of today, and in all the changes which will come, God is with us. The church bells of Redeemer ring daily at noon to remind us: God is our peace! God has sent us a Savior, whom we call Jesus, who once was dead, but now we know he lives! He lives in the compassion and love we hold for one another. We have faith in Jesus who has heard our cries, and answers them with compassion and healing. So we trust in God, and follow Jesus who leads us in the way that gives us life! For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.